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ABSTRACT

This address begins by reviewing the long heritage in Utah (132 years) of teachers gathering together for the purpose of improving their service to students. But there is danger of the system hardening and becoming more important than the services it was created to deliver, and it is within the frame of these historical choices that the address then suggests that what in academia is now called "ethics in education" should be called "morality in education." The address argues that the issue of morality in education is the same issue that poses the central problem in intellectual history: Do individuals have both a spiritual and physical dimension or just a physical dimension? The address then considers a primary response to the problem, citing the historians' explanation for the shift from traditional beliefs to the modern perspective known as the "secularization hypothesis," an explanation popularized by theorists such as Marx, Comte, Dewey, Freud, and others. Two personal experiences which provide a "bookends" view of rhetoric are cited--that of winning a high school debate tournament, and, much later, that of serving as the president of the Far Western Philosophy of Education Society, and between these two experiences came the realization that talent, however useful, is not a quality foundation for human life. Instead, it is argued, morality is rooted in genius (in the ancient sense of an attendant spirit allotted to every person at birth to preside over destiny in life), not in talent. The address concludes that morality in education, therefore, depends upon the educator having the willingness and courage to acknowledge the existence of a spiritual domain. (RS)

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Ethics in Education: Should We Focus on Talent or Genius?

An Address Delivered to the Utah Speech Arts Association
At East High School in Salt Lake City, Utah
October 16, 1992

by

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Ethics in Education: Should We Focus on Talent or Genius?

Neil J. Flinders
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It is a pleasure for me to join you in this conference of the Utah Speech Arts Association. The practice of teachers gathering together for the purpose of improving their service to students has a long heritage in this state. It dates back 132 years--to October 19, 1860--just three years after the National Education Society was organized. On October 13, 1860, the following notice appeared in the *Deseret News:*

> The School Teachers and Patrons of education are respectfully requested to attend a meeting to be held in Mrs. Pratt's schoolroom . . . on Friday evening next (Oct. 19), at early candle light, for the purpose of establishing a society for promoting the educational interests of the community. Punctual attendance is requested.

The circumstances were different--porter house steaks were 25 cents; mutton chops 20 cents; and 3 eggs, any style, 12 1/2 cents--but the purpose of that meeting was the same as the purpose of this meeting.

Resolutions passed by the Utah County Educational Convention in January of 1860 supported this purpose. The following excerpts, typical for the times, convey a familiar theme.

Resolutions

I That the progress of any people . . . depends in a great degree upon the education of the children in their midst.

II That the mission of teachers and guardians of public instruction is a sacred mission. . . .

IV That we will endeavor to obey and faithfully accomplish our mission to the children committed to our care; and to this end, we will seek to improve ourselves, in order that we may be thoroughly qualified to instruct others.

V That the profession we have chosen is a useful and honorable one, and we will endeavor to elevate the same in the public mind; . . .

VI That conventions are mediums of union. Here ideas may be interchanged, the experience of each becomes the property of the whole; . . .

VII That the progress of education depends, in a great degree, upon the energy and ability of school teachers. A lack of these on the teacher's part creates indifference on the part of parents and pupils; and under such circumstances there can be but little advancement.

VIII That no public interest can prosper unless aided and sustained by the community at large.

Teachers need each other if they are to maximize their performance and influence for good. I hasten to add, however, that systems can become dangerous. Soft systems are necessary and very helpful because they facilitate a service. But there is danger when a system hardens to the point that preserving the system becomes more important than providing the service it was created to deliver. These hard systems tend to become dysfunctional and counterproductive. For example, I am concerned when a Teacher Education Association in one of our neighboring states announces

> The major purpose of our association is not the education of children, rather it is or ought to be the intention and/or preservation of our members rights. We earnestly care about the kids and learning, but that is secondary to the other goals.[1]

This disposition is self serving; it destroys rather than builds individuals and educational programs. These are the kinds of choices that give significance to the topic I have been assigned--**ethics in education.**

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[1]From an OEA-NEA Bulletin issued by the Oregon Education Association as quoted in *RECAPS: Concerned Educators against Forced Unionism*, 6, 2 (Winter 1982) p. 4.

A Change in the Title

At the outset I want to declare a word change in this topic. Rather than addressing *ethics in education*, I prefer to step off the intellectual merry-go-round into the middle of the street and talk about *morality in education*. Irving Kristol illustrates my point in an article that appears in the *Wall Street Journal*. A friend of his, John Shad, had announced that he was making a $20 million dollar gift to the Harvard Business School for the purpose of teaching "business ethics." "Nice--but naive," says Professor Kristol, who goes on to explain that ethics as now treated in the universities has little or nothing to do with *moral turpitude*. He notes that the terms moral and ethical "used to be more or less interchangeable, and probably still are for most people. But not in academia. Over the past 50 years an important distinction has been constructed between the two. This is why today we have professors of ethics, but no professors of morals."

Dr. Kristol clarifies that "what in academia is now called 'ethics'--is no longer committed to moral instruction or moral elevation. It is proudly 'value free'--i.e. committed to radical, rationalist and supposedly scientific skepticism." Kristol points out that these modern professors are not much influenced by what they teach, and the students are not necessarily influenced by what they learn in the classroom. Fortunately the moral character of most university students, he says, are fairly well formed and fixed before they take a course in ethics. "At the high school and elementary levels, however, ethicists are a lot more dangerous, and one should think twice before letting them loose in the school systems." Kristol admits that studying ethics can certainly sharpen a person's wits. "But," he concludes, "as we recently have had occasion to learn . . . being sharp-witted is perfectly consistent with being immoral."[2]

In light of this distinction I have modified the title of this presentation to read: **Morality in Education: Should We Focus on Talent or Genius?** My plan is to briefly sketch the nature of the problem, to suggest a primary response to this problem, and then to respond to a few questions. Obviously the topic is larger than the time frame, but hopefully this discussion will stimulate you to examine the subject personally.

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[2]*Wall Street Journal*, September 15, 1987.

The Root of the Problem

Reduced to its most fundamental question the issue of morality in education is the same issue that poses the central problem in our intellectual history: **Do we have both a spiritual and a physical dimension to our existence or just a physical dimension?** It is a matter of how reality is to be defined? This debate extends from antiquity to the present day. Modern man describes these two views as the *supernatural* and the *natural*. The Greeks expressed these conflicting views as the *mantic* and the *sophic*. Students of ancient Judaism refer to this same issue as the *vertical* (person to God) and the *horizontal* (person to person) perspectives.[3]

The choice we make on this question sets the course for education and affects nearly every decision related to values issues in the schools. This choice influences the way we define and pursue all three of the major scholarly traditions: (a) an individual's relationship to God, (b) one person's relationship to another, and (c) a person's relationship to things. This in turn shapes all aspects of our daily lives.

According to the supernatural view, there is a reality that transcends our physical world. The supernatural view acknowledges that our existence includes both a spiritual and a physical dimension. The universe is seen as composed of two basic building blocks: (a) spirit and (b) physical matter. Since a person is more than a physical organism, explanations of both natural and human phenomena may be explained in several different ways: by matter acting on matter, matter acting on spirit, spirit acting on matter, or spirit acting on spirit. This is the traditional way of thinking about human life in western culture.

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[3]See James L. Thrower, *The Alternative Tradition: Religion and the Rejection of Religion in the Ancient World,* (The Hague: Mouton, 1980); Erwin R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Graeco-Roman Period,* 13 vols. (N.Y.: Houghton-Mifflin, 1926), vol. 1:8-22; F. L. Baumer, *Religion and the Rise of Skepticism* (N.Y.: Harcourt, Brace, 1960; James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore, Mass.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

In contrast, the modern perspective (naturalistic) maintains that the universe consists of only one building block, physical matter, with no realities beyond the temporal domain. From this position, all issues are explained by matter acting on matter. Modern school curriculum teaches that psychology can be reduced to biology, biology to chemistry, and chemistry to physics. A person is a physical organism, nothing more. Can you find a contemporary public school textbook that is based on any other assumption? Not likely. Because this is the view that prevails in the academic intellect of western culture; it is the foundation of contemporary public education curriculum. Modern definitions of morality--distinctions between right and wrong--are extensions of this premise.

Because modern society essentially rejects the vertical view, that a person has a relationship with God, there is a conflict when it comes to moral and character education. The power structure that shapes today's scribal society limits itself to horizontal beliefs in an individual's relationship to self, and to other mortals, and to this physical world. Herein resides the primary conflict between the traditional religious view of our American heritage and the general focus of contemporary education and legal practice. From the traditional and contemporary perspectives, the origin, nature, and destiny of humankind are defined differently.

Diversity of belief has always existed in our society. But the modern crises is less manageable because the old foundation for broad social consensus has been removed. In the traditional view a belief in the supernatural and the natural world are both legitimate. The modern view, however, rejects the reality of the supernatural; by definition God does not exist, and thus values related to an individual's relationship to God are publicly irrelevant. There is no middle ground to share. Any belief in the vertical relationship may be temporarily tolerated, but ultimately it has to be unacceptable--in all contexts. This realization is necessary to understand many of the current social and educational issues.

When people agree with conclusions that are based on a premise with which they cannot agree, consensus is unstable. It is this 20th century condition that causes many to ask if consensus is even possible in America[4] As long as America's social and

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[4]*Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, Summer 1980 (Theme: The End of Consensus).

educational institutions are grounded in a system of belief that accepts both a supernatural and a natural dimension of reality, the possibility of stable consensus exists. Conclusions expressed as values may legitimately be attached to both supernatural and natural suppositions. Tolerance is possible as well as unity with integrity.

On the other hand, if the exclusively naturalist position prevails, unity cannot exist if the diversity includes both believers and nonbelievers. Divisiveness is inevitable. The logical perspective for the exclusive naturalist is to eliminate, not tolerate the opposition. To such an individual the vertical believers can legitimately be considered insane, not just ignorant, because they believe in that which does not appear to exist. This establishes rational grounds to incarcerate or even eliminate them.

Like the American founders, the large majority of U. S. citizens today believe in both a spiritual and a temporal dimension to our existence. The language of the Declaration of Independence and all fifty state constitutions expresses or implies this two-dimensional position. But modern textbooks, curricula, and educational policy are generally based on a one-dimensional, horizontal belief. For example, a recent survey of state departments of education reported that curriculum objectives related to educational values in all fifty states were couched in the horizontal or temporal, none in the spiritual context.[5]

Paul Vitz of New York University has authored the most comprehensive study of this issue as it relates to public school textbooks. After reviewing 90 of the most used textbooks K-12, he asks: "How could this textbook bias happen? What brought it about?" He concludes that "the bias in these books is not accidental; much of it certainly is not the result of some misunderstanding about separating church and state." Rather, Vitz maintains, the bias is due to a general rejection by the intellectual community of the traditional American way of life.[6]

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[5]Gregg R. Johnson, "Curriculum Objectives of States That Do and Do Not Mandate Moral Education," unpublished doctoral dissertation, Brigham Young University College of Education, 1990.

[6]Paul Vitz, *Censorship: Evidence of Bias in Our Children's Textbooks* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Servant Books, 1986) p. 78.

The Secularization Hypothesis

The historian's explanation for the shift from traditional beliefs to the modern perspective has been referred to as the *Secularization Hypothesis*--an explanation popularized by theorists such as Marx, Darwin, Comte, Dewey, Freud, Malinowski, Niebuhr, and many others. This hypothesis holds that evolutionary forces are moving society away from a sacred orientation toward successively higher levels of secular orientation in which the sacred becomes less and less significant.[7] Following nearly a century of popularity, the secularization hypothesis is currently under serious attack. An intense philosophical controversy has emerged in many disciplines, sometimes referred to as the modernist/post-modernist debate.

The impact of the modernist movement in the arena of morality can be viewed in less abstract terms. For example, compare the motion picture "Production Code" of 1930, which was written as a defense against the liberalizing mood of the "Roaring Twenties," to the "Classification and Rating System" adopted by the industry in 1968. The 1930 code was based on three general principles:

1. No picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence, the sympathy of the audience shall never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil, or sin.

2. Correct standards of life, subject only to the requirements of drama and entertainment, shall be presented.

3. Law--divine, natural or human--shall not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation.

It provided twelve particular applications, along with carefully articulated reasons supporting each of its aspects.

In contrast, the 1968 rating system consists of a single sentence guideline for a committee of twelve appointed by the producers, distributors, and theatre owners: "CARA shall consider as criteria among others as deemed appropriate the treatment of the

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[7]Philip E. Hammond (editor) The Sacred in a Secular Age (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985) p.1.

theme, language, violence, nudity, and sex."[8] This approach relies on a single, small group consensus rather than stipulated, rationally defined and defended general principles.

This change in basic assumptions can be traced and illustrated in nearly every discipline. The consequences flowing from the shift away from what Walter Lippmann called our "Ancestral Order" to a modernist, "humanistic" point of view is evident in most dimensions of our society. Rudyard Kipling, C. S. Lewis, and numerous other writers have addressed this issue.

Talent or Genius?

As seniors in High School, my debate partner and I won the men's division of the Weber College Invitational Debate Tournament. More recently, I served as President of the Far Western Philosophy of Education Society. These two experiences, a young one and an old one, provide a bookends view of rhetoric close and up front. Between these two experiences I have learned that talent, useful as it might be, is not a quality foundation for human life. The Sophic experience may be exciting and perhaps socially advantageous, but it is a kite without an anchored string. Morality, the kind of morality I want for myself, my children, and my grandchildren, is rooted in *genius* not in *talent*.

I recognize that some modern writers use the term genius differently than I am applying it. Soren Kierkegaard, for example, in an essay entitled "Of the Difference between a Genius and an Apostle" defines genius partly as it was applied in antiquity and partly as it is viewed by modernists.[9] He based his essay on the second of four qualitatively different meanings now assigned to the word in Webster's unabridged dictionary. I will use the first meaning assigned to the term in that dictionary.

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[8]Charles S. Aaronson, ed., *The Production Code, 1930*, in *International Motion Picture Almanac* (New York: Quigley Publication Co., 1966), pp. 786-793. See also *Rules and Regulations of the Classification and Rating Administration*, in *International Motion Picture Almanac* (New York: Quigley Publication Co., 1982).

[9]Soren Kierkegaard *The Present Age and Of the Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1962)

In this setting I will use John F. Gardner as a fellow witness to the validity of stressing the ancient view of genius over talent to establish morality in education. Gardner observes:

> It is generally assumed that while every child possesses some talent, genius can be ascribed to very few. For this reason, the development of talent rather than genius has become the goal of education. I should like to suggest that we are reversing the true order of things, turning them upside down, to the harm of society as well as of the individual.[10]

In the original sense of the word, genius was not considered as restricted to a few, but was the rightful possession of all individuals. The *Oxford Universal Dictionary* defines the ancient view of genius as "an attendant spirit allotted to every person at his birth to preside over his destiny in life." The similarity among "Greek, Roman, Arabian, and Hebrew views of genius is much greater than their difference."[11]

Expanding on this definition Gardner states:

> For all these peoples, genius was the norm, as well as the crown, of full human development. Genius was the spiritual possibility of every man. It was not, however, a natural endowment but a supernatural grace, and in this respect above all it differed radically from mere talent, even the greatest talent. Thus for ancient man, genius was an agency of the divine spirit that descended upon him from above; while for modern man genius is no more than a name for a human talent raised to its highest degree.[12]

Educators who want more than relativism as a basis for morality should not stand idly by while genius is beaten to death with a secular stick and buried under a new title.

Gardner says that for a person to prepare so that genius can work within, the individual must first acquire confidence in the existence of an order of being higher than self. Then the seeker of

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[10]John F. Gardner *The Experience of Knowledge* (New York: Waldorf Press, Publishers, 1975) p. 103.
[11]Ibid. pp. 106-107.
[12]Ibid. p. 107.

genius "must develop obedience . . . and humility. Ambition, pride, and self-will cut the soul off from its divine source." Evidence shows that the pagan idea of immortal genius and the Christian idea of divine grace are very closely related. "Both acknowledge: 'It is the Lord that doeth the work.' . . . Both seek perfection of the earthly vessel. . . Despite certain differences, the Christian saint and the pagan hero are much alike," Gardner claims. They both act for the benefit of humanity. [13]

Until the past few decades this ancient view prevailed in our schools. Genius had little to do, specifically, with the intellect. It had more to do with the heart and the will. Its workings depended more upon the development of character than upon the abilities or talents with which the person was endowed at birth. "Indeed," Gardner says, genius "withdrew from the person who was pleased with his outstanding endowment, while it approached the person who, knowing how inadequate his own faculties were, yet continued with compassion and valor to do what he could for his fellow man." Here is the true foundation of self-discipline. As Gardner argues, it is impossible to conceive of self-discipline, in any real sense, without the idea of a purpose that resides outside the self to motivate control. He explains:

> If the ordinary man is to gain insight, feel courage, assume control, and thus find the happiness that now eludes him, he will have to convince himself that something in him is of immeasurable significance and has unlimited capacity for bringing about good. He will then understand why the paradoxes of progress in modern society *must* become ever more outrageous, until men make the free choice to live from this higher source within themselves. We are being taught by events that it takes genius simply to live well the ordinary life of man. There is no man so poorly endowed that he cannot achieve the good he truly wants, if he will acknowledge the self above his self and invite that being to overshadow his life.[14]

Until we learn, and in order to learn, we need to be taught to rise above the physical passion of ego, above our own unaided intellect. This mastered, we can reach beyond our talents, outside of ourselves, to aid others who do not possess a stable foundation for

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[13]Ibid. p. 108.
[14]Ibid. p. 111.

moral authority, self-discipline, and lasting freedom. None of this is possible if by definition our education denies the existence of a spiritual domain. Morality in education, therefore, depends first upon our willingness and courage to acknowledge the existence of such a domain. This step alone will significantly alter the perspectives of right and wrong in our schools. Our desires must be less on getting to the cutting edge and more on thinning the veil.

If, however, as parents and teachers we continue to concentrate on the earlier and earlier promotion of intellect and talent, if competition in matters of talent and intellect alone drives our educational vision rather than the nurturing of genius, we are destined for destruction. I believe, as does Gardner, that "Boredom, cynicism, and exhaustion await the culture whose schools prefer bright little old people to genuine children"--children of genius.

Thank You